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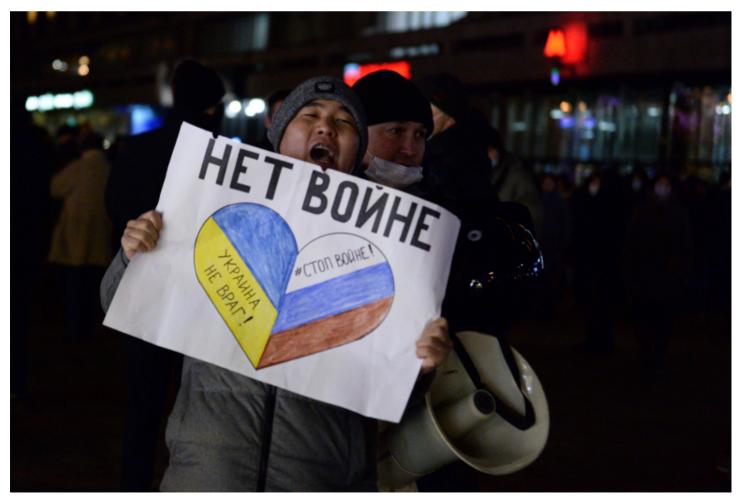
Russians are Putin's victims too

We also suffer from Russia's senseless war in Ukraine; we are also victims of its increasingly totalitarian regime.

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A demonstrator carrying a poster that reads 'No war' is seen as he gets detained by police during a protest against Russia's attack on Ukraine in Moscow, Russia on February 24, 2022 [Denis Kaminev/AP Photo]

Should I be sorry that I'm Russian? Should I be ashamed? These questions have been at the back of my mind for at least a decade. But since yesterday, when my country once again made headlines for all the wrong reasons, I can't seem to think about anything else.

I love Russia, and I want to be proud to call it my home, but how can I feel pride when I can't even recall the last time it did anything good for its citizens, or the world?

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When Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, I was too young to fully understand the gravity of what happened. But I could still sense it was wrong. And despite having absolutely no say over it, I felt somewhat responsible for the Russian government's actions. After all, during the Winter Olympics in Sochi, which took place just days before the annexation, I had celebrated every single gold medal Russia won as if it was my own personal achievement. I felt like this shouldn't be any different – you can't pick and choose when you get to identify with your country.

In the following months, the Russian state continued to behave in a way that attracted condemnation in the international arena and Russophobia became rampant across Europe. At the time I was studying in the United Kingdom, and I experienced this first hand. I found myself explaining over and over that "I did not vote for Putin", that "I am not homophobic", that "I do not support war". Once outside a concert venue in London my friends asked the members of a band when they would have a gig in Russia. "When you stop blowing up planes," was the singer's snarky response. He was referring to the Malaysia

Airlines plane that was downed by pro-Russian rebels over Eastern Ukraine earlier that summer. Of course, we knew that as a bunch of teenagers we had no responsibility for that tragedy – but the singer's comments still hurt.

The Russian government's outrageous actions did not hurt us, ordinary Russians, only by fuelling Russophobia and turning the global community against us. These actions, which caused so much suffering to so many, also crippled our lives in much more concrete ways.

Around the time of Crimea's annexation, I took a taxi from central London to Heathrow Airport. Throughout that hour-long journey, I kept refreshing the exchange rate between the British pound and the Russian rouble and watched it grow in horror. When I finally reached the airport, the pound was worth a whopping 115 roubles – a 155 percent increase from just a few months earlier when I first moved to the UK.

Suddenly, because of something my government did that I had no control over, my life, my education, my future was in jeopardy. My family's tourism business was paralysed. With all our savings in Russian currency, the cost of education in another country, the cost of living, the cost of rent had almost doubled. I wasn't sure if I could remain in the UK, if I could continue to put food on my table.

The Russian economy never really recovered from that hit. But life had to go on, so it did. We learned to live on much less, we accepted that we could no longer afford many things. Low exchange rates, economic stability, and frequent, visa-free European travel started to feel like stories from a different, long gone time – stories told to us young Russians by the previous generation who remember what life was like before Putin.

So we adapted, accepted life as it is, and kept hoping that things would change one day – that our country's reputation as an empire of evil would eventually fade.

Perhaps as a result of this acceptance, over the past few weeks, as the world speculated about another potential Russian incursion into Ukraine, life in Moscow was eerily normal. Hardly anyone mentioned the subject. After all, we have been living in a state of confrontation with Ukraine for eight years, and these speculations were nothing new.

It felt like everyone wanted to simply avoid even considering the possibility of war and the consequences that would inevitably follow.

It was easier, and more reassuring, to believe that the Western media was dramatising the situation and blowing it out of proportion, and that Putin was not unhinged enough to actually invade. Even as we watched his televised speech where he took an hour to explain why Ukraine shouldn't exist, ultimately recognising the independence of the Donbas separatist territories, we hoped that would be as far as he went.

So on the morning of February 24, when the Ukrainian people woke up to the nightmare of an all-out invasion, the Russian people also woke up to a nightmare of our own.

Of course, the two situations can in no way be compared. We did not hear explosions outside our windows, we did not see tanks rolling down our streets, we did not fear for our lives. But as we turned on our TVs, and glanced at international headlines, we also realised that life as we knew it was about to disintegrate.

Like our Ukrainian neighbours, overnight, we ordinary Russians too had become victims of the Russian government.

And we could share our pain with, or seek support from, absolutely no one.

The global community, which had long been inclined to perceive all Russians as supporters and enablers of a destructive regime, took no time to turn on us.

The internet was all of a sudden filled with hate, harassment and abuse directed at all Russians – including millions of us who never wanted this war, who never supported this war, who had no chance or opportunity to stop this war.

My partner, who is in desperate need of a job, told me that he decided to hide his Russian nationality on his CV – he was afraid that Europeans would be reluctant to hire a Russian national. I would have dismissed it as paranoia if several EU states hadn't already stopped issuing visas to Russians, effectively telling us we are no longer welcome.

Everyone, people on the internet, pundits and politicians on TV, protesters across Europe's cities made it clear that they hold us all responsible for Putin's actions. They made it clear that they believe we have the power to stop all this, and that we are doing nothing.

Even Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy expressed a similar sentiment "Do the Russians want war? I would really like to answer this question, but that depends on you, citizens of the Russian Federation," he said in a widely praised speech, urging us to protest against the invasion.

The truth is, the overwhelming majority of Russians do not want this war. We don't want any war at all. We held our breath when the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) forces marched into Kazakhstan this winter. We sighed with relief when, against all odds, Putin did not send troops to Belarus during the 2020 unrest.

And, perhaps surprisingly for many, Russians heeded Zelenskyy's call to protest. People took to the streets of Moscow, St Petersburg, and over 40 other Russian cities to tell Putin and his regime that the Russian people do not want this war. We did this despite knowing too well that we could face arbitrary detention, police brutality or worse. And we did. More than 1,800 protesters were arrested in 24 hours. Some will soon be freed after paying a fine. Many others will spend at least a few weeks behind bars. But we took to the

streets knowing these risks. We wanted to show the world this regime does not represent us.

I cannot imagine how Ukrainians feel today. Because I do not know how it feels to wake up to sirens, to hide in tube stations, to be scared that the next shell can land on your apartment. But I do share their outrage, their disgust, and hatred. And I know so many Russians like me feel the same.

It's despicable to attack a peaceful state – no history lecture could ever justify it. It makes me sick that our fraternal nations are pitted against each other. I hate that my beautiful country, full of bright and wonderful people, will forever be stained by the government's unforgivable actions.

Today we, Russians who do not want this war, stand in solidarity with our Ukrainian brothers and sisters. And we understand the world's anger towards our government. But we just wish that as people rightfully get angry with the Russian government, they do not direct their anger towards us too. We also suffer from this war; we are also victims of this increasingly totalitarian regime.

But still, I can't shake off the shame. So, for what it's worth, I finally know the answer to that question that has been on my mind for so long. I am sorry. I am sorry that I am Russian.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.

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